



THE NEW INDIAN EXPRESS

BENGALURU • MONDAY • MARCH 16, 2026 • ₹9.00 • PAGES 18 • LATE CITY EDITION

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CLOSE BATTLE AT THE 98TH OSCARS

Two frontrunner films *One Battle* and *Sinners* have a chance of breaking the all-time Oscar wins record

Best director: Reports quoting Oscar insiders said the Academy is likely to honour *One Battle* director Paul Thomas Anderson but *Sinners* director Ryan Coogler is equally deserving

Coogler could become the first-ever Black person to win Best Director in the 98-year history of the Oscars | **P11**

Best film: Leonardo DiCaprio-starring political thriller *One Battle* is neck-and-neck with Michael B Jordan's bluesy vampire horror *Sinners*

Best actress: A sure thing appears to be best actress nominee Jessie Buckley, who plays William Shakespeare's wife in *Hamnet*



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POLL SEASON BEGINS

Election dates for Assam, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, and Puducherry announced

RAJESH KUMAR THAKUR
@ New Delhi

CHIEF Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar on Sunday announced the polling schedule of four states and one Union territory, setting the stage for high-stakes electoral battles that could impact the political future of the ruling TMC in West Bengal, DMK in Tamil Nadu, BJP in Assam, and CPI(M) in Kerala.

Assam, Kerala, and Puducherry will go to polls on April 9, while Tamil Nadu will have voting on April 23. West Bengal will vote in two phases on April 23 and April 29. The results, for all, will be out on May 4.

The model code of conduct has come into effect immediately with the announcement.

Out of West Bengal's 294 constituencies, 152 assembly segments will vote on April 23 and the remaining on April 29. The two-phase polling in West Bengal marks a significant shift compared with the 8-phase election in 2021. To ensure peaceful voting, the ECI has deployed the highest ever deployment of security forces in the state.

West Bengal, held by Mamata Banerjee-led TMC since 2011, is headed for a fight to finish as the BJP is trying hard to win by raising law and order, infiltration, corruption, and appeasement politics as poll issues. "This election is more crucial for us than contests in other states," a BJP leader said.

In Tamil Nadu, the ruling



Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar during a press meet in Delhi | **P11**

2 BYPOLLS IN STATE ON APRIL 9

ECI announced bypolls for eight seats in six states. Bagalkot and Davnagere South in Karnataka, Goa's Ponda, Dharmanagar in Tripura and Nagaland's Koridang will vote on April 9; Gujarat's Umreth and Maharashtra's Baramati and Rahuri on April 23

DMK is facing stiff challenge from the AIADMK-BJP alliance, while actor Vijay-led TVK's entry may also upset poll calculations.

The Congress is confident of winning Kerala, currently held by the CPM which is eyeing a third term, while the BJP is also fancying its chances of making a breakthrough.

BJP-ruled Assam is another state the Congress is trying to stage a comeback.

In Puducherry, the ruling AINRC-BJP coalition is hopeful of retaining power as the DMK-Congress alliance is still in seat-share talks.

POLL SCHEDULE

APRIL 9
Assam
126 seats

Kerala
140 seats

Puducherry
30 seats

APRIL 23
Tamil Nadu
234 seats

April 23 & 29
(2 phases)
West Bengal
294 seats

RESULTS
MAY 4

824
Seats across
4 states and 1
Union Territory

17.4 crore
Voters eligible
to cast votes

Didi clears DA dues, hikes clergy pay just in time

SUBHENDU MAITI @ Kolkata

MINUTES before the Election Commission announced the Assembly election schedules in four states and Puducherry on Sunday, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee in poll-bound West Bengal announced a hike in honorarium for purohits and muezzins, and the clearance of Dearness Allowance (DA) arrears to state government employees.



She made the announcement on X at 2.40 pm, 80 minutes before the 4 pm press conference by the Election Commission to announce the poll schedule. Once the election is declared, the model code comes into effect, and such announcements are not permitted.

"I am pleased to announce an increase of ₹500 in the monthly honorariums extended to our purohits and muezzins," she wrote on X. Addressing state government employees, she said, "They will start receiving their ROPA 2009 DA arrears from March 2026 onwards."

BJP leader Suvendu Adhikari called Mamata's announcement a "desperate last-minute poll gimmick". It comes amid a standoff between the state government and its employees. The Supreme Court had directed the government to pay a portion of the DA arrears by March 31. **P10**

Iran keeps up hard talk, open to negotiations on Strait of Hormuz

AGENCIES @ Tehran / Tel Aviv

IRAN on Sunday threatened to widen the war while sending a stern message to its Arab neighbours that it has "ample evidence" that US bases on their territories were being used to launch attacks.

"This war will end when we are certain that it will not be repeated and that reparations will be paid," Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi told a news website.

His remarks came on the 16th day of the war that has jolted energy and oil prices across the world. On Sunday, at

70 MEDICAL STUDENTS RETURN TO NEW DELHI

New Delhi: Nearly 70 out of 101 medical students who left Iran on Saturday reached Delhi's Indira Gandhi International Airport on Sunday via Armenia and Dubai. Upset and angry with the Indian government not bearing their travel and boarding expenses, the students refused to speak to newsmen waiting to meet them | **P9**



least eight people were injured in Israel following missile launches from Iran even as even as Israel kept up strikes on Lebanon.

Araghchi said Iran was ready to talk to countries that want safe passage through the Strait of Hormuz.

An Indian-flagged crude tanker sailed out safely from UAE's Fujairah after loading oil on Sunday. *Jag Laadki* is the fourth Indian-flagged vessel to have come out of the war zone unharmed. **P11**

K'taka ups domestic, auto, commercial LPG supply

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
@ Bengaluru

THE Department of Food, Civil Supplies and Consumer Affairs, Karnataka, said LPG supply across the state has improved, including auto LPG and commercial cylinders, to avoid disruption of public transport and essential services. Over the past three days, 11.41 lakh domestic cylinders and 20,941 commercial and auto LPG cylinders were distributed. Authorities also seized cylinders and filed five FIRs in multiple districts



over illegal storage, transport and misuse.

In a press release, the department said oil companies have improved LPG distribution by about 20 per cent over the past three days, following directions from the Union government. The move is aimed at ensuring that public transport services, particularly autorickshaws that depend on auto LPG, continue operating without disruption. The department added that the increased supply would ensure that essential services are not affected. **CONTINUED ON P6**

EXPRESS READ

2 held for bid to bribe Odisha MLAs: DKS

BENGALURU: Deputy CM DK Shivakumar on Sunday said two persons were held for offering Rs 5 crore bribe to Odisha Congress MLAs staying in a resort near Bengaluru, to cross-vote in the Rajya Sabha polls in that state | **P4**

3 new PSIs die in road accident in C'durga

CHITRADURGA: Three newly recruited police sub-inspectors (PSIs) died on the spot, while two others sustained injuries in a road accident that took place at Heggere in the Challakere taluk of the district on Sunday | **P5**

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